If you were to write out a job description for a stage manager, the first thing you would need would be several sheets of paper. In fact, the handbook, Description of Duties, for the stage management degree program at the School of Music, Theatre & Dance is encapsulated in a mere thirteen.

If a production did not have a stage manager, someone—or several someones—would have to: coordinate the audition process; post the cast list; schedule the rehearsal spaces; prepare and maintain a prompt book with cues for virtually each moment of the show; attend weekly production meetings; be the point person for the shops and designers; compile the rehearsal schedule with all conflicts worked out; attend all rehearsals, arriving thirty minutes early and staying thirty minutes after to write up notes to distribute to the production team. Oh yes, and keep the process orderly and quiet.

Shall I go on?

On the other hand, if we take a step back and look at the bigger picture, the job description would read something like this: The stage manager is responsible for the seamless operation and smooth running of a production.

For the creatively inclined, people like Gina Rattan, senior directing major, keeping the artistic impulse under wraps can be a challenge. But precisely because she is a directing major and needs to know as much as she can, she volunteered as stage manager for the Department of Theatre & Drama’s production of As You Like It.

“It’s great practice,” Gina says. “This is the closest I can get to being in a position of high responsibility and communication on a production without being a director. And it’s a huge, HUGE advantage,” she adds, “because we have Nancy Uffner, who is absolutely fantastic at what she does. She’s a wonderful mentor and she knows what she’s talking about.”

Stage management has to be one of the least glorified aspects of the theatrical process, while, ironically, one of the most vitally needed. And Nancy Uffner, Production Stage Manager for the Department of Theatre & Drama for the past 13 years, is certainly one of the unsung heroes behind it all. The program can boast an amazing track record: pretty much all of the students who graduate from the program have found work in the field.

One of the most delightful success stories is alumnus Chris Jamros, who came to the University of Michigan from a small town in the Upper Peninsula planning to major in computer science. One day, Chris appeared at Uffner’s office door, having just volunteered to stage manage a MUSKET production. He was resourceful enough to find out where to get expert advice. A year later, Chris switched majors. He has been working on the smash Broadway hit Wicked since 2003, when he joined the stage management staff, and, since 2007, as production stage manager at the ripe old age of 30.

We asked Uffner what qualities make a good stage manager. After careful consideration—and a deep breath—she ticked them off: an understanding of the theatrical process and a willingness to serve that process; a brilliant set of people skills; the ability to listen, understand, interpret, and restate information; patience and a sense of humor; an absolute commitment to the project; an ability to stay neutral; trustworthiness.

These qualities, it would seem, all reside in Rattan. “Gina has a high level
of discernment, of process,” Uffner says, “of whose job is what and how to facilitate the process and not get in the way. She is very good at establishing relationships that allow her to be a leader but also a part of the company.” As for trustworthiness, “She’s got it in spades. People need to believe that their best interests are not only important, but paramount to the stage manager.”

“And when she’s stage managing, Gina has to take off her directing hat,” Uffner adds, “and she recognizes that. But I know it’s an inner conflict for her because she’s very creative—she has a creative eye, she has a creative vision, she’s just a creative thinker. But she also manages really well.”

Gina knew what she signed on for. “My creativity in this process only extends to creative problem solving and creative ways of thinking around an issue,” she says. “In no way do I have a say in creative decision making. My job is to facilitate whatever the director wants to do.”

The director, in this instance, is Gillian Eaton, an alumna of the Royal Shakespeare Company. She chose to plunk As You Like It in the 1950s, which opened up a whole realm of possibilities for costuming, music, and set design. “I love working on the show,” Gina says, “and it’s a fantastic thing to be a part of. Gillian pushes everyone hard, but in the most loving way. She doesn’t let them get away with anything but their best.”

Stage managing her last play as a senior has been a bittersweet experience for Gina. “It’s been a labor of love,” she says. “So many of my friends are in the play and I’ve seen everyone grow and transform as actors. We’re all together every single day except for Sundays. They are my family. And when the show’s over, suddenly there are all these hours in the evening and they’re so long and it’s very quiet. We call it ‘post-show.’ You sleep a lot, you reflect a lot, and it feels kind of lonely.”

But she won’t have much time to feel lonely. Immediately after As You Like It closed, she began her senior thesis, directing a Jacobean drama to be staged in the Arthur Miller Theatre. And this summer she is off to the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis as assistant director on a world premiere of a new musical, Prairie, based on Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House on the Prairie. After that, it’s New York, New York.

We asked Uffner how graduates launch their careers. “There are entry level and intern positions in theatres, opera, and dance companies all over the U.S.,” she says. “They can also go to a big city, like New York, Chicago, or Seattle, to become a part of the performance community and look for work. Many of the internships don’t pay, so they need to take money with them.”

“It’s almost like a year of graduate school. But it’s worth it because of the people you meet, what you learn, and what they will do for you for your next paid job.”

“The other thing is that we’ve got a pretty strong alumni network, so we have alumni hiring new alumni, we have alumni looking out for new alumni. We’ve got a pocket in New York and a pocket in Chicago and people in theatres around the country.”

With all that work and all the dues that need to be paid, what are the rewards of being a stage manager? “Being in on the art,” says Uffner. “There is no question that there are creative pieces of this job, though they’re often not apparent. It’s the theatrical process and it involves people of the theatre, which is why I got into it in the first place—because I love these people and this work.”